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SUBJECT: EAP DAS Eric John's Meeting with Communist Party
External Affairs Director

Ref: Hanoi 2154

1. (SBU) Summary: EAP Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Eric John met Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Commission on External Affairs Director for the Western Europe and Americas Department Pham Tien Nhien at the CPV headquarters September 27. The Ambassador, EAP Mainland Southeast Asia Director Scot Marciel and PolOff accompanied him. Nhien engaged in lengthy paeans to the health of the bilateral relationship and pointed out ideological connections between Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Ho Chi Minh. He acknowledged that some bad feelings between Americans and Vietnamese still exist, and must be addressed, but proclaimed the bilateral relationship to be on a "solid foundation." He and DAS John exchanged views on North Korea, and Nhien lamented Vietnam's lack of influence over the regime and inability to persuade the DPRK to follow the Vietnamese economic reform model. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Opening the discussion, Nhien apologized for the torrential rain and high wind, noting that Vietnam was enduring the worst typhoon to hit the country in decades. In the previous 24 hours, Vietnam had evacuated more than 300,000 residents of high-risk coastal areas, more than had ever been evacuated for a storm before. Despite the typhoon, he said, Vietnam and the CPV welcomed DAS John's visit.

DPRK

3. (SBU) Nhien observed that DAS John's previous assignment was as Political Minister/Counselor in Seoul and asked if he would provide information on the recent round of six-party talks, to which DAS John provided a general readout. In response to Nhien's question about a recent news report that Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill would travel to Pyongyang, DAS John said he had heard no official information on any possible trip to North Korea. On the subject of North Korea, however, DAS John expressed the USG's appreciation for Vietnam's "humanitarian" treatment of sensitive situations involving DPRK refugees in Vietnam. He recognized that relations between North Korea and Vietnam are both "special and difficult" and said that the GVN's actions on behalf of the refugees, while possibly negative for Vietnam's relations with Pyongyang, would be positive for its relations with other countries.

4. (SBU) Nhien said that during his visit to Washington, D.C., in July 2005, he had the opportunity to have some discussions on the subject of North Korea and refugees with several interlocutors, including Senate Foreign Relations Committee senior staffer Keith Luse. Luse and others had asked him to help leverage Vietnam's relationship with the DPRK to promote "productive developments" on the Korean Peninsula. Vietnam acknowledges that its relations with the DPRK are more substantial and better than U.S.-DPRK relations, and that over the past few months there have been improvements in Hanoi-Pyongyang ties. However, the actual influence of Vietnam over the DPRK remains extremely limited. The North Koreans "love their Juche doctrine of self-reliance, and no matter what others say, they act on their own." If anyone at all has influence over North Korea, Nhien concluded, it must be the Chinese.

5. (SBU) Nhien warned that the United States must focus more on developing its relationship with the DPRK. "I have a feeling that there is not enough trust between the North Korean people and the United States," he said confidently. "From the U.S. side, you don't trust the North Korean willingness to follow through on their commitments. From the North Korean side, they are afraid that if they give away their nuclear weapons, they could be attacked." Without trust, he said, an agreement is impossible. This was an observation he said he made as an official of Vietnam, a country familiar with a distrustful relationship with the United States.

Bilateral Relations Strong, but Mistrust Remains

16. (SBU) Turning to U.S.-Vietnam relations, Nhien said that in past years there have been many improvements, and the level of mutual trust has been elevated "to a great extent." The peak of the relationship in recent years was reached during the successful visit of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to Washington in June. "The road from mistrust to confidence has been a long one, and even now I would hesitate to say we have full confidence in each other." That residual lack of confidence is "understandable," he explained, "because prejudice remains among parts of the U.S. and Vietnamese peoples." He cited the 2004 U.S. Presidential campaign as evidence that the "Vietnam syndrome" is still a problem in the United States. In certain parts of the Vietnamese population, people continue to see the United States as a wartime enemy. However, it is the policy of the CPV and the GVN that, once relations with a country are normalized, the Party and State will try to improve the relationship step by step. The Ambassador interjected that the real surprise is that bitterness between the two populations is so rare, not that it exists. And what bitterness there is does not affect the relationship, the Ambassador added.

Addressing the War's Legacy

17. (SBU) "We should never forget the suffering experienced by both sides of the war," the Ambassador continued. "And we must maintain our efforts to manage the legacy of that war, such as demining and unexploded ordinance clearance, an area where the United States has done a great deal." The United States is grateful to the GVN and the Vietnamese people for the exceptional effort to assist with the fullest possible accounting of personnel missing in action from the wars in Indochina, he said. Vietnamese MIA numbers are also very high and the United States wants to help Vietnam account for its personnel as well. The other step the GVN should take to resolve these issues is to make a greater effort to reach out to the Vietnamese-American community, the Ambassador advised. There is more reconciliation to be done. Finally, the Ambassador recommended, both sides need to seek a more constructive way to address the Agent Orange issue; we should have greater dialogue and seek out creative ways to work together.

18. (SBU) Nhien agreed with the Ambassador, and said that in addition to official ties, the efforts of non-governmental organizations and individuals can make a positive difference in bilateral relations. As an example, he cited the recent publication of the war diary of a female Vietnamese doctor who was killed during the war. A U.S. soldier found the diary and kept it for over thirty years, only recently returning it to Vietnam on a visit. The diary has become one of the best-selling books in Vietnam among young people, and the care with which the U.S. veteran and his brother handled the diary before returning it to Vietnam greatly impressed the Vietnamese people. "The reaction of society, especially youth, to the publication of this book has demonstrated the extent to which the popular attitude towards the United States has changed. It is clear that people-to-people relations improve mutual sympathy and understanding very much." (Note: Actually, the original of the diary is still retained at Texas Tech University's Vietnam Center. End Note.)

Strong Bilateral Relations in Both Countries' Interest

19. (SBU) Returning to his talking points, Nhien said GVN policy is "to develop the bilateral relations according to the framework between the two leaders expressed in the Joint Statement of the PM's visit as two partners of cooperation, stability and development." The Ambassador, he observed, had discussed the issue of bilateral relations with Politburo member and Standing Member of the Secretariat Phan Dien (reftel). Phan Dien made clear that Vietnam attaches "great importance to the role of the United States in the world as well as the relationship between the two countries." It was no coincidence that Phan Dien had discussed Ho Chi Minh's 1945 ideology, or that he had highlighted the fact that Vietnam's Declaration of Independence begins with the Preamble to the U.S. Declaration of Independence. Continuing the "Great Americans" theme, Nhien catalogued his own visit to the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, where he read the words that found their way into Ho Chi Minh's 1945 speech, and to the other end of Independence Avenue, where Nhien said he "discovered what was stated by Abraham Lincoln: that government is of the people, by the people and for the people."

110. (SBU) Nhien said that it is "our belief that relations between the United States and Vietnam will develop, because relations are commensurate with the interests of the two peoples, as well as the region and the world at large."

However, the development of positive relations requires political will from both sides and the cooperation of the populations on both sides. Nonetheless, Nhien said he feels as though "there is a firm foundation for building a whole house."

11. (SBU) DAS John responded that, in the United States, there is a limited and decreasing number of people who do not recognize the growing U.S.-Vietnam relationship. Contrasting his experience with the bilateral relationship in 1989 (when he first worked on Vietnam issues) and today, the progress is "astonishing," DAS John said. Both sides benefit from economic and cultural ties, and consultations with policy makers in both countries convinced him that "there is no area of policy difference where we do not have a work plan to resolve our differences." On issues like WTO accession, which are highly important to Vietnam, the real problems are technical and require only time and effort for negotiators to resolve.

DPRK, Continued

12. (SBU) The DPRK has a lot to learn from Vietnam, DAS John said. Both countries fought difficult wars, but Vietnam is now a regional actor and increasingly internationally integrated. Pyongyang has done none of that, remains isolated and is blind to the welfare of its citizens. DAS John encouraged Vietnam to convince North Korea to follow Vietnam's lead in taking a responsible position in the world community.

13. (SBU) Nhien noted wryly that he traveled to Pyongyang in 1989, and that things had not changed in the ensuing 16 years. The same unfinished buildings are still unfinished, and the rationing system is still in place. DAS John advised that there is one significant difference: in 1989 there were goods to ration, but in 2005 there are only ration tickets. Nhien said the North Koreans are experimenting with economic reform, including creating markets in the countryside and in cities, thus improving production. Some export processing zones have also been built near the Chinese border. As further evidence of North Korean reform, Nhien cited an upcoming visit by DPRK "delegations" to Hanoi to observe the Vietnamese economic liberalization experience. However, he caveated: "We recognize that the experience of one country, no matter how good, cannot be completely applied to another country. We cannot tell our North Korean friends that they should copy our model, although we want to."

Comment

14. (SBU) Pham Tien Nhien is a fairly regular contact of the Embassy by virtue of his position as head of the Party's "Americas Desk." He is usually fairly reserved and sticks close to well-scrubbed and familiar points that are, at best, warily neutral towards the United States. This meeting was a remarkable departure from the usual boilerplate and reflected Nhien's perception of a personal connection between him and DAS John.

15. (SBU) Comment continued: The riff on Ho Chi Minh's being an ideological blood brother of the U.S. Founding Fathers is consistent with the GVN line that has percolated through the official media since last winter and does not by itself reflect any new warming trend between the CPV and the USG. Nhien's friendliness, however, is a positive development, and the lengthy engagement (and commiseration) on North Korea demonstrates the degree to which the concept of the United States and Vietnam sharing common international interests has taken root even in the infertile soil of the Communist Party Headquarters. End Comment.

16. (U) DAS John cleared this cable.

MARINE